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On (not) seeing the chicken: Perdue, animal welfare, and the failure of transparency

**ABSTRACT:** In this essay, we analyze Perdue's animal welfare campaign from 2016 to 2020 to isolate how demands for transparency are mediated and subverted by Perdue's public facing rhetoric. Though Perdue's annual releases and commitments to change nominally constitute a victory for animal welfare advocates, the company's campaign enacts transparency as a sort of publicity for the company that belies marginal gains for the lives of chickens and may ultimately result in increased meat consumption. In providing trackable metrics, offering paternalistic justifications for their treatments of chickens, and through strategic omissions of language and visuals, Perdue satisfies demands for transparency without committing the company to meaningful changes. In that way, transparency-publicity becomes a performative end that allows the company to continue its behavior and give consumers cover for increased meat consumption. We conclude with the implications of this co-optation.

*Keywords:* Animal Rights; Rhetoric; Activism; Paternalism; Food Justice

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There has been significant increase in consumer demand for “ethical” meat in the last ten years, even as the amount of self-identified vegetarians and vegans has increased (Forgrieve, 2018). Though there exist more vegan individuals now than at any time in recorded history, there remains a huge market for animal (by)products. However, a series of events, including undercover videos documenting abhorrent conditions in contract farms for Perdue Agribusiness and Tyson slaughterhouses, spurred increased demands that corporations integral to the American food system open their proverbial doors for citizens’ scrutiny (McKenna, 2017). Consumers desire animal products without having to compromise ethical considerations, a wish seemingly fulfilled by transparency from meat companies (Franklin, 2015).

That demand for transparency occurs against a backdrop of secrecy and obfuscation endemic to the American food system generally (Broad, 2016; 2020), and the slaughter of non-human animals specifically (Pachirat, 2011). McKenna’s (2017) *Big Chicken* substantiates widespread public ignorance regarding agribusiness practices like antibiotic use in animals and general mistreatment of non-human animals raised for slaughter, and as such exposes and public outrage can (re)shape consumer demand. There exists, however, the possibility of industry led change; in 2016, Perdue Farms Inc, the parent company of Perdue Foods and Perdue Agribusiness and fourth largest chicken producer in the United States, committed to improved transparency in their operations to meet evolving consumer demand (Souza, 2019). Following public backlash in the 2010s for antibiotic use in chickens and failing to maintain animal welfare standards, Perdue promised annual releases featuring “where we were, what we did, and where we are going” on animal welfare and transparency. Rather than further the meticulous distancing and sequestration that retrenches slaughterhouses as liminal spaces (Pachirat, 2011), Perdue highlights their “Perdue way” as an ethical and transparent mode of animal husbandry and

slaughter. Though the company has received accolades for its moves towards accountability, we argue their public facing rhetoric demonstrates the power of transparency to paradoxically preclude either accountability or identification with nonhuman animals, both ends being goals of movements centered around animal welfare and animal rights.<sup>1</sup>

We analyze Perdue's animal welfare campaign to isolate how demands for transparency are mediated and subverted to become a sort of publicity for the company. The importance of transparency, stemming from what Pachirat calls a "politics of sight" (2011, p. 15), presupposes the public *seeing* what goes on in a slaughterhouse is a political tool capable of changing consumer and industry behavior, given the extent to which animal slaughter has been hidden from public view. However, demands for transparency can be corrupted towards "sadistic and voyeuristic ends" (Hallsby, 2020, p. 80) where the performance of transparency offers no service to the public. Edwards (2020) would characterize Perdue's actions as transparency-publicity designed to delineate their product from competitors and burnish their damaged image. Transparency-publicity, in this context, refers to the strategic revelation of information to gain market advantage. Though such a delineation is meaningful in itself, analysis of Perdue's campaign reveals troubling implications for food justice and animal welfare movements. We suggest that Perdue's campaign goes beyond sanitizing the company and their product for public consumption. Rather, their actions constitute obfuscation that keeps consumers from literally and

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<sup>1</sup> There is not a monolithic "animal welfare movement," but for the sake of parsimony we will use the term to refer to the constellation of groups seeking improved treatment of nonhuman animals. A litany of scholars (e. g. Broad, 2016; Ko, 2020; Muller, 2017) highlight deep, seemingly intractable divisions between the myriad groups committed to the cause of nonhuman animal treatment, perhaps the clearest division being between advocates like Temple Grandin who call for humane treatment of nonhuman animals in the pursuit of their exploitation (an example being humane, small scale slaughter of animals who were well cared for) versus rights-based approaches which extend ethical or legal protection to nonhuman animals (thereby precluding their exploitation, in essence vegan abolition).

metaphorically seeing the chickens they consume, thereby precluding identification or further demands for accountability.

We highlight two implications for Perdue's performance of transparency-publicity. First, Perdue's case clarifies how a company's co-optation and mediation of transparency can stymie incremental approaches to animal welfare reform, as activist demands are nominally met even as exploitation and consumption of nonhuman animals increases. Second, we suggest Perdue's transparency efforts are constitutive of a broader food culture that propagates a "good-food bad-food" binary appealing to those concerned with "clean" and "sustainable" eating (Asioli et al. 2017; Broad, 2020). That contribution to food culture may ultimately prove deleterious, as it could facilitate sustained or even increased meat consumption, a consumer behavior linked to both adverse health and environmental impacts (Poore & Nemecek, 2018).

Our study contributes to an ongoing conversation at the intersection of transparency, food justice, and rhetorics of animal welfare. On a practical level, meat consumption in the United States, specifically that of chickens, is immense and rising. McKenna (2017) notes that in 1960, Americans ate 28 pounds of chicken per year, but in 2016 that was up to 92 pounds, or roughly a quarter pound a day. Such consumption is not benign, despite its widespread cultural acceptance; meat centric diets pose health risks to individuals, including increased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, colorectal cancer, and type 2 diabetes (Richi et al, 2015). Further, diets containing large quantities of animal foods necessitate production processes that are "degrading terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, depleting water resources, and driving climate change" (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). As such, the interrogation of rhetoric at the nexus of both industrial agriculture and consumer demand is of the utmost importance, as it reveals the capacity for transparency to organize both consumer preferences and corporate response.

With these arguments in mind, we proceed as follows. First, we unpack the theoretical underpinnings of the present analysis, with focus on how calls for transparency have (not) organized the rhetoric of animal welfare movements. Second, we analyze documents from Perdue concerning their initiatives from 2016 to 2020. Finally, we conclude with implications for both the rhetoric of animal welfare and society broadly.

### **Transparency and Identification with Nonhuman animals**

Transparency has been afforded a mythic status, both as a laudable goal for governments and corporations and as a demand for activists invested in revealing wrongdoing and impropriety at institutional levels (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). Hallsby (2020) calls demands for transparency a “dyadic relationship in which friction, noise, or resistance is neutralized” (p. 69), an ideal that stands in opposition to an individual or institutions’ attempts at obfuscation. The “seductive pull” of transparency is a glimpse of the impossible, an unmediated representation of reality. That seduction has led to moments where governments or corporations engage in *publicity*, or the making of something visible “that one desires to be seen in a particular way in order to reap the benefits of that perception” (Edwards, 2020, p. 1547). Edwards (2020) develops a typology of transparency-publicity that distinguishes when transparency constitutes a form of accountability or civic participation versus when transparency acts as reputation management device to burnish the image or sell the product of a company. Edwards’ (2020) refinement of the spectrum of actions constituting transparency-publicity clarifies the capacity for institutions’ openness to (fail to) achieve desirable public ends. In transparency-publicity, a company’s openness may be a self-serving mechanism of delineating a company from its competitors while nominally meeting cultural or societal demands for greater transparency.

Wood and Aronczyk (2020) conclude that an actor's efforts towards transparency constitute a mode of organizing power, and as such "exploring uses of transparency helps clarify the ways revelation might constrain the excesses of elites, or conversely reinforce their privileges" (p. 1538). This exploration necessitates understanding how transparency adopts a cultural role, reinforced through performance and institutional rhetoric, that may be distinct from demands designed to curtail excess. Demands for transparency, and the enactment of policies to promote (or extract) transparency can construct broader public cultures or expectations. Hall's (2017) work on airport security is instructive in transparency's capacity to be both performative and constitutive of a broader public culture that elevates the term to mythic status. In analysis of seemingly arbitrary TSA guidelines and "security theatre," Hall demonstrates demands for transparency do cultural work that organize citizens' actions (through constraints and discipline) and desires (through rehearsal of catastrophes and rewarding acquiescence).

That cultural work is particularly visible in movements for food and environmental justice. To many activists, transparency is anathema to the present configuration of vertically integrated factory farming because the industry's ever-increasing use of euphemism, obfuscation, and distance precludes public awareness of their practices (Broad, 2016; Franklin, 2015; Pachirat, 2011). Public knowledge in America about the food chain is lacking, a lack related to and permissive of industry secrecy. Both industry opaqueness and dwindling agricultural literacy have meant that changes to large scale animal husbandry in the last fifty years have proceeded without widespread recognition (e.g. Lancaster & Boyd, 2015; Franklin, 2015). A plurality of Americans does not possess a basic understanding of agricultural processes and the relationship of food products like hamburgers to their progenitor animal, and many more are understandably ignorant regarding the intricacy of the United States food supply chain (Broad, 2016).

Broad (2020) suggests “a lack of trust in the industrial food system has led to calls for food system reform and greater transparency” (p. 1591), calls manifesting in the formation of the “Good Food Movement” (GFM). The GFM is a constellation of initiatives and individuals organizing their participation in food systems around “dealienat[ing] residents from their food” (p. 1590). In the context of food justice and environmental activism, transparency is crucial because citizen knowledge of corporate malfeasance is tied to effective advocacy (Clarke & Peterson, 2016). As such, widely dispersed sets of activists and consumers uses transparency as a watchword, a mechanism of delineating different foods and companies from competitors to create a broader culture of consumption that centers consumers’ right to know regarding processes of growth, slaughter, and food transportation (Broad, 2020).

It is unsurprising, then, that some animal welfare activists use demands for transparency in the form of labeling, auditing, or metaphorical glass walls as modes of public persuasion and accountability. One of the most controversial practices, the use of undercover video recordings of on the ground conditions in farms and slaughterhouses to embarrass companies into action and fuel consumer lawsuits, clarifies the revelatory and revolutionary power transparency can have in contexts where information is hidden from consumers. These video recordings produce what Delicath and Deluca (2003) call “image events” that spur outrage and action (p. 315). In revealing the hidden reality of the food chain, the artifice and interreference of meat producers (largely) drops away. Furthermore, the presence or threat of an unmediated gaze could a.) produce a more knowledgeable public who decide to (not) patronize these companies or consume meat, and b.) produce preferable behavior by those companies through Foucauldian self-regulation. Beneath those programmatic goals, however, there is also hope within segments of animal welfare movements that transparency will spur identification with, and therefore



changed behavior towards, nonhuman animals. That outrage and impetus to act ensures image events can function as what Adams (2015) calls “interruptions” capable of shaking complacency with animal consumption.

Transparency, through image events and otherwise, can close the distance between humans and nonhuman animals by encouraging individuals to consider the positionality of animals raised for consumption (Atkins-Sayre, 2010). This consideration constitutes a form of identification, or seeing through juxtaposition the core differences and similarities between subjects (Burke, 1969; Hall, 1996). Adams (2015) *The Sexual Politics of Meat* clarifies how transparency, or the ability to see a non-human animal, literally or figuratively, is crucial to identification. Adams suggests that, in the context of both meat consumption and sexual violence, the body experiencing trauma is discursively reduced to its parts. Female bodies are objectified and metaphorically dissected, making the woman invisible relative to her prominent, “desirable” features such as her buttocks, breasts, and thighs. By elevating and emphasizing the desirable body parts of an entity, the entity becomes visible *primarily* as those body parts, with concomitant shifts in treatment. Nonhuman animals, then, are rendered invisible as “absent referents” through dismemberment and renaming for consumption (Adams, 2015, p. 20). The process of (re)naming and (re)packaging, sometimes done through emphasis on body parts and other times locations (“Rocky Mountain Oysters” come to mind), “mask[s] the horror of the corpse and makes meat eating psychologically and aesthetically acceptable” (p. 114). Though the literal flesh of the animal may be visually and rhetorically present, abstraction renders the presence of the animal unintelligible.

In this context, identification is related to and facilitated by transparency in both undercover exposes of bad treatment and jarring imagery revealing the general (mis)treatment of

nonhuman animals. Identification often turns on intelligibility, or the capacity to *see* and render a subject knowable, and therefore relatable. Butler (2004) suggests the illegibility of some human lives is understandable by asking for whom we (are able to) mourn. Butler asks “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what *makes for a grievable life?*” (p. 20, emphasis original). Transparency, and by extension interruptions through image events, are presumed to render the lives of nonhuman animals intelligible and mournable. Strategies pursuing this visual invitation to mourn abound: the Humane Society of the United States incorporates photos of dead animals on their website; PETA’s website includes horrific photos and videos of animals in precarious conditions (Atkins-Sayer, 2010). As it pertains to animal suffering and the inhumanity of modern industrial animal agriculture, seeing can indeed be believing because of the capacity for an unmediated gaze upon an animal to spur changed behavior and identification. In this way, calls for transparency can both (re)structure industrial practice and alter consumer understandings of their relationship to non-human animals.

### **Analysis**

Following public backlash for failing to maintain basic animal welfare standards, Perdue committed to improved transparency in their operations. That commitment yielded a surprising amount of publicly available documentation, as in 2016 Perdue began releasing annual statements on their initiatives. Perdue’s website routinely points viewers to their animal welfare reports, featured on their own “Animal Care” tab. We analyze the first five reports- 2016 to 2020- to substantiate how the company constructs their actions as transparency-publicity to preclude both accountability for the company, and consumer identification with chickens.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Bringing together rhetorical fragments for analysis is in line with McGee’s (1990) work on text and fragmentation, as “our first job as professional consumers of discourse is inventing a text suitable for criticism” (p. 288). Following their compilation, a textual analysis was conducted to locate themes and interactions with transparency as an organizing term (see Brummet, 2019, for more detail).

these reports, we identify three interrelated rhetorical moves that function as transparency-publicity to simultaneously placate consumer demand and insulate the company from criticism. We isolate, first, how Perdue abstracts chickens to their constitutive body parts by introducing metrics of health and behavior control. We then consider how Perdue justifies their actions towards chickens such that consumers recognize and sympathize with the management and destruction of a less capable being. We finally turn to how Perdue strategically omits information through euphemism and imagery even as they invite consumers to understand their processes.

### *Abstraction and the Absent Chicken*

In Perdue's Reports, when chickens are abstracted, they become unintelligible as beings deserving of equitable treatment and more easily subject to regulation and disposal. Though the reports promise a transparent look at animal welfare in the service of "go[ing] beyond just the 'needs' of our chickens to also include what our chickens 'want,'" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016, p. 2), chickens are abstracted to their body parts thus obscuring visibility and stymying identification. Rather than emphasizing the body parts of the chicken in the context of preparation and consumption (breasts, thighs, "giblets") Perdue uses metrics of chicken activity and health that divide audience understanding of the animal into constitutive parts. Perdue presents metrics that speak to the welfare of the animal without considering, holistically, the health or wellbeing of the entity, thereby sliding chickens further from animality towards abstract manageable products (Grauerholz, 2007). This slide nominally meets activist demands for transparency by offering measurable goalposts and justifications for behavior while excusing Perdue's extension of minimum livability to chickens prior to their consumption.

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This abstraction constitutes a form of transparency-publicity by setting a standard and measuring progress against that standard. Perdue argues both on its website and in the reports that the company measures itself against the Five Freedoms, “a globally accepted standard for animal husbandry” that has been endorsed by the World Organization for Animal Health and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. These five freedoms (Freedom from Hunger and Thirst, Freedom from Discomfort, Freedom from Pain, Injury, or Disease, Freedom to Express Normal Behavior, and Freedom from Fear and Distress) are meaningful baselines for the treatment of farm animals, and Perdue’s “charting our progress” with them signals a commitment to animal welfare (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016). Almost immediately, however, standards shift away from the Five Freedoms and towards specific metrics that emphasize not the whole of the chicken’s experience, but components of the chicken’s body.

Take, for example, a core metric of improvement from 2016 onwards: “paw health.” Metrics such as “paw health,” distance the consumer from the chicken even as the company elevates those metrics as indices of their own transparency efforts and the desirability of their product. Foot pad health is “measured in the chicken house prior to shipment by calculating the percentage of paws that are ‘Grade A.’ Paw health is an indicator of how well the house environment is being managed” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016, p. 32). As a metric, paw health does suggest meaningful welfare elements, such as air quality (circulation and temperature) and litter moisture (primarily ammonia content resultant from chicken urine). In circumstances where those two elements are off, chickens can suffer breathing issues or, in the case of high ammonia levels, burns on their legs, stomachs, and torsos. Though metrics are clearly useful for establishing baselines and ensuring quality control, Zuller (2019) suggests that increasingly corporate and public culture have prioritized measurements to the detriment of the

phenomenon being measured. Metrics present an allure, as they quantify phenomena, thereby making it legible, and, ultimately, manageable. This management, however, can become an end in itself. Measurement may serve not as an indicator of an underlying problem but rather a performance that satiates demands for quantification, thereby constituting a form of transparency-publicity.

By emphasizing paw health, Perdue adopts a metric of transparency that simultaneously abstracts chickens and precludes accountability on other measurable standards of welfare. Suggesting paw health is the singular metric for meeting parts of the Five Freedoms has two inadvertent rhetorical functions. First, focusing on paw health occludes the totality of the chicken's experience, including mental and physical distress resultant from factory farming, and moves attention onto an easily reportable metric that claims to represent the health of the animal. In the service of transparency, abstraction elevates partially representative metrics to be treated as synecdochic for the health of the whole chicken.

Second, paw health as a metric diverts public attention from inhumane impacts of large-scale chicken farming. By insisting the grade of paws is a reasonable indicator of environmental health, Perdue shifts the focus away from their own actions regarding breeding, overfeeding, and lax maintenance standards onto how an environment can, apparently passively, adversely impact the animal. The emphasis on paw health, gait, and leg measures occludes conversation on breast and hock burns resulting from ammonia exposure (Franklin, 2015). Additionally, hindered mobility for chickens can occur due to the conditions of a farmer's operation, but more often result from the combination of feed and specific breeding strategies. Mobility is hinted in the 2016 report introducing metrics of health: "We [Perdue] utilize gait and leg scoring systems across the company to ensure chickens are able to walk comfortably as they grow" (p. 7). When

paired with discussions of paw health, these metrics in the reports imply that chickens are being tracked as they exist in a neutral environment. In reality, those scores are often assessing literal inability to move due to weight gain and muscle myopathy. Many broiler birds are bred and fed to gain weight at such rapid rates that their bones, joints, and hearts cannot support their bodies, resulting in significant welfare concerns, yet Perdue categorizes broiler growth rate issues as a mere matter of “discomfort.” The company chooses not to acknowledge the immense suffering birds undertake when their legs become deformed, they become too overweight to walk or they suffer heart failure due to their unnaturally large bodies (Franklin, 2015). Abstraction via metrics allows for Perdue to sidestep accountability and reporting regarding the total picture of animal welfare, thereby stymying demands of activists and regulators.

#### *Paternalism and Hacking the Chicken*

In addition to abstracting the chicken, Perdue frames itself as a benevolent entity responding to and promoting “natural” chicken behavior. By offering a benign justification for their actions, Perdue performs transparency-publicity by inviting the consumer to understand their logic and behavior. Perdue suggests they are a kind provider, one actively invested in improving the lives of chickens because the chickens themselves are incapable of such change. The opening paragraph of the 2018 report illustrates this frame:

When we announced the Perdue Commitments to Animal Care in 2016, it was revolutionary (...) We started to ask: what allows the chicken to express normal behaviors in the company of its own kind, and what can we do to further minimize fear and distress? (Commitments to Animal Care, 2018, p. 2)

The notion of “allowing” the expression of normal behavior, combined with laudatory language of revolution, imports a logic of paternalism onto Perdue’s interactions with their flocks.

Paternalism is “the limitation, influence, or judgment of choices, whether physical, psychological, interpersonal, cultural, social, professional, or political of one person, public, or organization by another” (Tinker, 2019, p. 315). Paternalism is often configured in the mode of a parent-child relationship, whereby regulation of one party by another is justified by the reduced autonomy of the regulated party. In many incarnations, paternalism features, but does not require, a gendered schema that demotes women as beings in need of regulation from the state or a familial patriarch (Hasian & Bialowas, 2009). Adams (2015) suggests that both nonhuman animals and human women are discursively treated as incompetent entities who fulfill the goal of their existence by being consumed by men. That incompetence, reminiscent of the legal framework of coverture (see Coker, 2020), is a frame that justifies and sanitizes intervention for the sake of the controlled subject, often to the praise of the dominant party. These arguments are common in broader discourses of animal welfare, among both individuals invested in violence against nonhuman animals and those who seek improvement in their conditions. Adams (2015) notes that justifications for hunting often include population control to prevent starvation. On the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, Muller (2017) notes that foundational figures in the modern animal welfare movement have constructed frameworks of welfare that strip nonhuman animals of agency and position humans as benevolent managers. In practice, institutions like Certified Humane permit and defend practices like beak trimming (the forcible removal of poultry beaks without anesthetic) because of chickens’ “natural behavior” that includes aggressive pecking. Even some radical vegan abolitionists highlight animals’ dependence on humans as a justification for elimination, specifically in the context of domestic animals that have been manipulated so far from their natural state that they “do not belong in our world”

(Francione & Charlton, 2016, para. 5). In each instance, paternalism is a recognizable schema that justifies exploitation or abuse of nonhuman animals in the name of the animal's betterment.

Paternalism functions as transparency-publicity by transporting a recognizable logic onto Perdue's behavior, thus inviting the consumer to render Perdue's actions legible, and therefore defensible. That transportation is facilitated by the widespread accessibility of arguments featuring paternalism that strip agency from nonhuman animals to justify control or disposal. In that way, Perdue's explanation of their actions assumes the cultural weight of prior articulations concerning the (in)competence of nonhuman animals.

In the reports, paternalism comes in the form of encouraging chickens to engage in "normal" behavior. Perdue wishes to encourage "play" and implement modifications "specifically designed to address broiler chicken growth rates that cause discomfort to birds" (p. 6). This encouragement occurs on two fronts: "play" and activity levels, meaning "Eating, Drinking, Resting, Playing" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016, p. 9). Perdue suggests in the 2016 report: "we will continue to study "play" and activity levels, and implementation of enrichments that address comfort levels appropriate for different stages of a bird's life. Our goal is to double the rate of play/activity by our chickens in the next three years" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016). In the 2020 report, Perdue discusses farmer designed enrichments as "hacks" (p. 17) to change chicken behavior. That encouragement treats the chickens as entities that must be prodded and controlled for their own good.

Paternalism is also present in conversations about breed specific problems regarding weight and activity. Perdue treats those problems as innate, static issues with chickens rather than conditions bred into chickens through industrial practice and selective breeding for weight gain. In the 2018 report, Perdue suggests "We recognize the health and welfare challenges



associated with today's fast-growing chickens, including leg and muscle issues. We are also committed to supporting customer demand for higher-welfare breeds" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2018, p. 10). Rather than acknowledging the current flock of broiler chickens as the result of breeding designed to maximize growth, Perdue positions themselves as benevolent researchers devoted to solving a problem for chickens stricken by nature. In that pursuit, Perdue "tested a total of 11 different breeds over the past year, gathering information on activity, welfare and production" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2019, p. 11).

When placed against the broader frame of Perdue's dispassionate observation of chickens, reduced to "hackable" entities that must be managed for their own well-being, the justifications for breeding become less about welfare and more about satiating consumer demands. Perdue ultimately concludes that they will "continue to actively study and learn about alternative breeds, both to meet growing customer demand for higher welfare chickens, and to identify the traits that contribute to healthier chickens" (Commitments to Animal Care, 2019, p. 2), a framing that positions the company as responsive even as they fundamentally devalue the lives of chickens. This benevolence constitutes transparency-publicity, in so far as consumers are invited to understand Perdue's logic towards continued patronage. In that invitation, however, consumers are stymied from understanding on the ground conditions and treatment of chickens in favor of accepting a culturally saturated justification for management that precludes meaningful changes to the company's behavior.

A logic of paternalism serves a two-fold function. First, paternalism empowers Perdue to frame the bare extension of livability as a breakthrough in welfare. Perdue's notion of "encouraging" play naturalizes abhorrent conditions and suggests each subsequent action they (do not) take is justified for the betterment of their chickens through guidance and control. For

example, Perdue notes that in 2016, “12% of our chickens have access to outdoor pasture areas and natural light via windows” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016, p. 5), a situation they intend to rectify. A plurality of animal welfare activists concurs with animal scientists to suggest natural light is vital for chickens, allowing for regulating sleep and relieving anxiety (Franklin, 2015). However, Perdue suggests in the 2017 report that this basic improvement in welfare is in fact innovative and capable of promoting beneficial behaviors. They frame their actions as responsive, suggesting that by the end of 2017, the company will “install windows in 200 existing poultry houses and use those houses to compare bird health and activity to enclosed housing. *If effective* in increasing bird activity, we will establish annual targets for retrofitting houses with windows” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2017, p. 17, emphasis added). The slow rate of change is justified under a framework of dispassionate observation for the chicken’s betterment. In the 2018 report, Perdue suggests “we continued to increase the number of chicken houses with windows, and learned that natural light is important to chickens” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2018, p. 2). Finally, in the 2020 report, Perdue boldly states “we believe that windows and natural sunlight create a better environment for the chickens, and for the people who care for them” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2020, p. 17). Despite this discovered importance, Perdue only installed windows in “52 percent” of their facilities (Commitments to Animal Care, 2020, p. 17). Paternalism reframes Perdue’s actions not as *correction* of past behavior but as *innovation* pertaining to future behavior, thereby precluding an assessment of past farm conditions. In line with the prior analysis, establishing metrics (doubling the rate of measurable play/activity) is paradoxically a mode of obfuscating conditions in favor of manipulatable data points and partial indices that can be treated as the whole.

Second, beyond justifying slow progress and menial changes, treating chickens as incompetent beings requiring management gives both the company and consumers cover to continue exploitation and consumption (Grauerholz, 2007). Purdue's paternalism erases the animal by sanitizing husbandry and butchery, thereby stymieing activism and obfuscating an otherwise effective politics of sight (Pachirat, 2011). Violence and control, in this context, is less about the destruction of the subject than it is about *use or maintenance of the subject* for eventual consumption. This positionality justifies regulation nominally for the benefit of the less fit party. Adopting the position of benefactor caring for incompetent chickens suggests Perdue is engaged in a highly responsive animal welfare campaign that extends the bare minimum of livability.

*Omission: Missing words, missing faces*

A litany of scholars highlight how euphemisms disguise animal suffering and death within the agricultural industry to ease the tension experienced when consuming the bodies and byproducts of nonhuman animals (e. g. Adams, 2015; Franklin, 2015; Gruaerholz, 2007, Stibbe, 2012). Those euphemisms omit technically accurate or socially weighty phrases in the pursuit of softened impact or obfuscation. The previously mentioned practice of debeaking, removing the upper portion of the beak of a chicken or a turkey, has become “beak trimming.” Nonhuman animals are never “raped” or “forcibly inseminated;” rather, Perdue engages in “selective breeding” methods and experimentation with different breeds of broiler chicken (Commitments to Animal Care, 2019). Franklin (2015) notes labeling increasingly *appears* to placate consumer demands on industrial agriculture, but lack of oversight ensures no underlying guarantees of animal welfare are made to consumers through those labels.

One clear example of this omission through euphemism is how slaughterhouses become “processing plants”, or in the case of Perdue’s reports, “harvesting plants” (Commitments to

Animal Care, 2016). Nonhuman animals are “harvested” in the same way one gathers non-sentient plant foods. On killing hens and reducing them to meat, Perdue suggests the company currently “mandates stunning without the chance of regaining sensibility” in their “harvesting” plants (Commitments to Animal Care, 2016). “Murder” of less valuable or sick animals in the is “culling”, or in 2017 report, birds were “processed” and made available for commercial sale (Commitments to Animal Care, 2017). Perdue does not offer additional information regarding most of their current slaughtering process, in effect relying on public ignorance to maintain de facto secrecy as they present industry lingo without context.

The primary method of stunning utilized by large-scale chicken farmers in the United States involves hanging chickens by their feet on a metal conveyor belt and dunking them into electrically charged water (Berg & Raj, 2015). Stunning by electrically charged water is disconcerting for animal welfare activists, as birds can regain consciousness and experience intense fear and pain prior to their death. Additionally, there are welfare concerns regarding the handling and shackling of birds prior to stunning. Perdue eases these tensions by a) failing to detail, in the reports, the company’s current protocol and b) boasting their use of a controlled atmospheric stunning (CAS) system at one of their plants in Milford, Delaware as a “significant step forward for chickens and our associates” (Commitments to Animal Care 2020, p. 20). By focusing on what they plan to do with a CAS system, Perdue makes unverifiable claims regarding their current stunning methods. The CAS allows Perdue to claim guaranteed stunning without the chance of regaining consciousness, but the use of electrically charged water as a means of stunning prior to slaughter offers unreliable and inconsistent results (Berg & Raj, 2015). It is further worth noting that, as of 2020, Perdue still only has one CAS system in place, despite its prominence in the welfare reports (Commitments to Animal Care 2020).

Beyond the euphemistic treatment of animal slaughter, Perdue engages in a visual sleight of hand to suggest openness while concealing parts of the food chain. Like euphemism, Perdue omits key details of the food supply chain as a mode of sanitizing and generating publicity for their campaign. Take, for example, invitations, in the 2017 and 2019 reports, to “tour our farms and plants. We encourage our farmers to be open to visitors within the constraints of biosecurity and business needs” (Commitments to Animal Care, 2017, p. 33; Commitments to Animal Care, 2019, p. 20). Perdue touts a goal of over 100 tours a year and increasing, despite the comparatively small number of farms giving tours; only one was readily identifiable through internet searches, an organic farm in Henderson, MD. The tours touted in the document appear part of Perdue’s “Follow the Flock” initiative comprised of eight families who publicize their farm’s activities through Facebook and Instagram.

Tours are one way of achieving transparency-publicity; they constitute both a real and imagined opportunity to investigate the goings-on of a company, even if the opportunities to pursue them (and chance of actual revelations of impropriety) are comparatively low. Beyond tours, however, Perdue’s emphasis on individual families creates a form of transparency-publicity that invites consumers to “see” their operations without any underlying risk of accountability or backlash. One common element present amongst all of Perdue’s animal care reports is photographs of contracted farmers and their families. In the reports, farm workers are smiling as they gently handle animals; an owner cradling a hen, others holding newborn chicks. Beyond gentleness and happiness- themselves obfuscatory of the financial and mental health realities of contract farming—the picture Perdue offers is one of heterosexual whiteness. In the 2016 report, 5 photographs of white people and/or white families are included; in the 2017 report it doubles to 10 photographs of the same. 2018 includes 5 photos of white folks and, for the first

time, one photo of a black man. In 2019, the report includes 7 photos of white people, and the 2020 report contains 14 pictures of white persons/families.

Perdue effectively whitens their workforce to resolve the racial tension at the core of modern industrial slaughter. To be fair, contract farmers in the United States are overwhelming white and male; a 2014 USDA report placed the number at 85% of operators as white males (MacDonald, 2014). As such, one might expect that the images of the animal welfare campaign to include, primarily or majorly, white faces. Despite the relative accuracy *in portraying contract farmers*, the imagery of Perdue's reports serves an important transparency-publicity function that precludes meaningful accountability or introspection. Perdue's operation is not just contract farming; like most large-scale chicken processors in the United States, vertical integration means that Perdue employs many other individuals for the handling, transportation, slaughter, and packaging of chickens. By flooding their website and Animal Care reports with pictures of white families, Perdue cultivates an image of unobjectionable and sanitary openness without acquiescing to any risk of transparency pertaining to the nature of their workforce. They create visual events that intimate the reader with the people of Perdue's operation without inviting introspection, dissonance, or follow up.

The reports, and by extension the tours of all white and organic farms, visually precludes an interrogation of the staggering (disproportionate) rate of minorities and women working in and exploited by industrial agriculture. In the same way that abuse of animals within industrial agricultural is often unacknowledged or glossed over, racialized suffering resulting from the consumption of sentient beings is seldom discussed. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), more than 80% of slaughterhouse jobs are held by immigrants, women aged 18-25 and people of color (*UFCW Action*). Perdue's Animal Care

reports boast pictures of green fields and happy, white families or farmers gingerly caressing farm animals, but according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), more than one half (51.5 percent) of slaughterhouse workers are immigrants subject to dangerous working conditions and economic precarity (Fremstad et al., 2020). Of slaughterhouse packers and packagers 75% are people of color; of animal laborers, freight, stock, and material movers 68% are people of color; and 67% of animal industrial truck and tractor operators are people of color. Many “frontline” workers within slaughterhouses live in low-income households making less than 200% of Federal poverty level wages, and of the thousands of workers who transport, butcher, slice, cut, gut, inspect and package the dismembered bodies of animals, 85% do not have health insurance (Fremstad et al, 2020). The work of a slaughterhouse employee is grueling both physically and psychologically, and illness and work-related injuries are frequent (Pachirat, 2011). Immigrant workers who speak little English and possess little to no knowledge of their rights are less likely to report injuries which occur on the job, leaving them to rely on emergency departments at hospitals as their primary source of medical care (Fremstad et al, 2020).

As noted above, many workers employed by slaughterhouses to do “dirty work” of slaughter and maintenance are people of color including immigrants. Slaughter is sequestered from public view, having been moved to rural areas which experience significant upticks in violent crime that carries a racial perception (Fitzgerald, 2010), and discourses of immigration in the United States routinely invoke damaging tropes of purity, pollution, disease, and cleanliness to discuss the character of the (white) nation state (Cisneros, 2008). By focusing on white families, Perdue sanitizes for the audience the presumed agricultural work force, skating over racialized perceptions of immigrants and communities around slaughterhouses while preventing the audience from seeing the scope of human misery. In addition to resolving the racial tension at

the center of the meat packing industry, Perdue's Animal Welfare Reports signal openness to work with farmers without addressing the profoundly negative impact of industrial agriculture on people of color. In effect, the whiteness portrayed by the Animal Welfare Reports performs transparency-publicity while occluding accountability.

### **Implications**

Perdue's public facing rhetoric satisfies demands for transparency and improved animal welfare while facilitating further exploitation and meat consumption. To conclude, we suggest Perdue's enactment of transparency-publicity belies the weakness of incremental approaches in animal welfare and suggests the need for more radical theorizing and actions to address the widespread exploitation of nonhuman animals. Second, we substantiate the claim that Perdue's strategy will likely lead to increased meat consumption. That increased consumption is deleterious given the long-term impact meat eating has on the health of the planet.

Our analysis suggests an ineffectiveness of calls for transparency as identification strategies when met with industry responses like that seen in Perdue. At the front, our analysis demonstrates the obfuscatory nature of Perdue's programs and rhetoric, functioning as Edward's (2020) transparency-publicity to benefit the organization. Though the reports document positive material changes, including the removal of antibiotics, implementation of enrichments, and expansion of living space for chickens, ultimately even the most progressive industrial agriculture in the United States lags other countries with more stringent standards for welfare (McKenna, 2017). Significantly, Perdue's efforts and position as an industry leader may portend the adoption of partial and incomplete measures of welfare justified in the ways detailed here, thereby stymying the efforts of animal welfare movements.



We would also note that Perdue's efforts foreclose on the capacity for transparency-publicity to lead to identification with non-human animals. As such, the company's response precludes extending legal protection to sentient others or shifting individual sensibilities in the treatment of nonhuman animals. Recall that Adam's (2015) conceives of interruptions as encounters that clarify an individual's relationship to hierarchies of oppression and disrupt complacency by encouraging introspection. Jarring information is at the core of calls for transparency; the meat industry's meticulous distancing functions as what Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) theorize, and Broad (2016) expands, as *agnostology*, or the social production of ignorance. Our analysis demonstrates the impossibility of identification through transparency when met with Perdue's response. As the company's transparency-publicity results in abstraction and obfuscation, the capacity for a person's ethical consideration of non-human animals and their complicity in exploitation is comparatively low. Empirical research suggests that reducing moral disengagement through conversation and image events can decrease willingness to consume meat (Buttler et al, 2021), though Perdue's strategy appears to preclude moral engagement. Indeed, even as Perdue moves nominally towards welfare-based changes, there is virtually no scenario in which transparency for the meat industry results in less meat *production*.

Therein lies the second implication for our analysis. For many who have been socialized to believe the consumption of animal products is compulsory, Perdue's efforts may satiate the wish to partake in animal consumption under participation in the "Good Food Movement." In the same way that Hall (2017) substantiates the performance of transparency within airports as a component of a broader public culture of security and paranoia, Broad (2020) highlights discourses of transparency as constituting an orientation towards food and food systems. Consumers are increasingly aware of how food choices impact health, environmental welfare,

nonhuman animal welfare and labor exploitation, an awareness that has spawned the “clean label” trend (Asioli et al. 2017). This trend, part and parcel with the “Good Food Movement,” situates some food as acceptable based not only on healthfulness, but on the qualities of the *production*. Consumers equipped with the vocabulary to designate certain foods “clean”, “sustainable”, or “humanely raised”, can purchase “health” and forms of identity through foods produced certain ways (Pilgeram & Meeuf, 2015). Given Perdue’s employment of transparency-publicity to meet consumer demand, it is likely their “Animal Care” culture facilitates increased meat-eating at a time where such actions constitute both an individual and societal risk.

Obviously, a plant-based diet is inconsistent with Perdue’s business model, or the meat industry broadly. It is unreasonable to expect a company to advocate for decreased consumption of their product, even if a company’s complicity in environmental degradation demands accountability under a framework of corporate social responsibility (e. g. O’Connor & Ihlen, 2018). The environmental implications of industrial animal agriculture do not exist within a vacuum, however, and the rhetorical landscape that justifies consumption of meat obfuscates the ethical and environmental consequences of that consumption. We suggest Perdue’s campaign reinscribes the status quo with one dangerous addition; now, consumers have been offered a rhetorical out that presumes chickens raised under the Perdue way are a more ethical or healthful option for meat consumption. Accordingly, Perdue’s public facing rhetoric has severe consequences for the animal lives involved, and in encouraging further consumption they are complicit in damage to the livability of the planet. Globally, the industrial animal agriculture sector is a main emitter of greenhouse gasses. Greenhouse gas emissions resultant from food production, including plants and plant-based foods, are highest for animal products, both

conventionally and organically raised. Comparatively, greenhouse gas emissions are the absolute lowest for organic plant-based foods (Pieper et al., 2020).

Our analysis demonstrates the difficulty of identification through transparency-publicity. As Perdue's efforts to mediate transparency result in abstraction and obfuscation, the capacity for a person's ethical consideration of nonhuman animals and their complicity in exploitation is comparatively low. When combined with the satisfaction of consumer demands for "ethical meat," Perdue's transparency-publicity is troubling in its capacity to preclude individuals from considering their relation to the oppression of nonhuman animals.

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